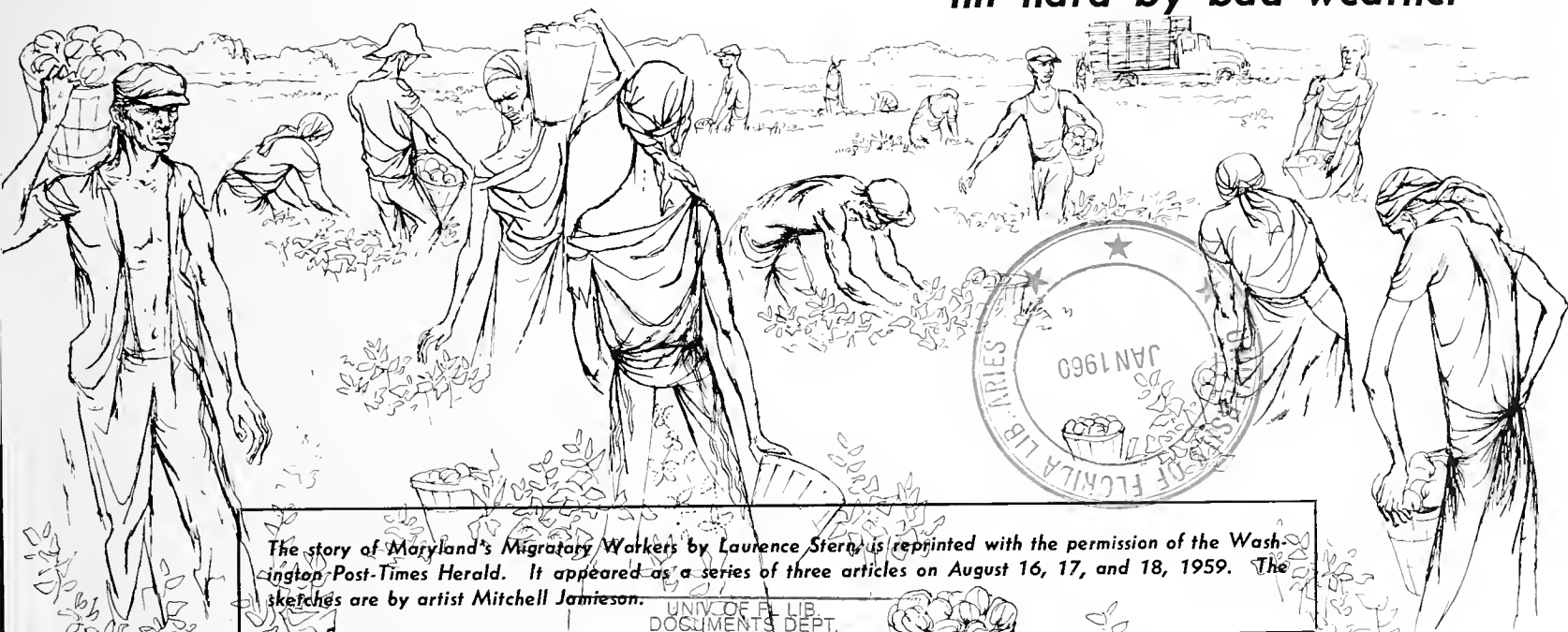


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# Maryland's Migratory Workers

*hit hard by bad weather*



The story of Maryland's Migratory Workers by Laurence Stern is reprinted with the permission of the Washington Post-Times Herald. It appeared as a series of three articles on August 16, 17, and 18, 1959. The sketches are by artist Mitchell Jamieson.

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*In a bad season, there is the specter of empty stomachs for their families.*

# Maryland's Migrants Hit Hard by Bad Weather

## HUNGER SPECTER RAISED FOR VAST FORGOTTEN HORDE

TALLY McNEIL lives in a dingy, one-room shack on the Eastern Shore with his pregnant wife, five children and his worries.

They share three cots, a two-burner stove and a gnawing uncertainty over where the next dollar will come from.

"In the last 2 days I ain't picked more than \$2 worth of tomatoes," said Tally, head hunched between his husky shoulders. "That don't buy us much."

When the harvest is good, a migrant picks until his knees are sore and his back aches. In a bad season, there is the specter of empty stomachs for himself and his family.

Maryland's newly established Commission on Migratory Labor is looking into the living and working conditions of thousands of migrants like Tally who annually pour into the Shore's great truck farming belt.

### Drought, Rains Halve Crop

This summer the Shore has been hit by a devastating combination of drought and heavy rain. Because of the weather, there has been only half the usual crop of tomatoes, cucumbers, beans and peppers.

Nevertheless Tally McNeil, his parents, five brothers and two sisters will be back from Pompano, Fla., next year to gamble again with nature, just as they have for the last 11 years.

Last summer 5,455 migrants swarmed into Maryland to pick

the crops and haul them to canneries and other markets. Most are Negroes from Florida. Others come from Mississippi, Alabama and Louisiana.

The tri-State Eastern Shore lies along one of the three broad corridors through which some one million American and foreign migrants stream northward each year as crops ripen.

Another wave moves upward through the tier of Mid-western States and a third comes up through California.

Waddell's Migratory Camp, where the McNeils live, was built by the Federal Government to house Bahamians and Jamacians brought there during the war years to relieve the farm manpower shortage.

It was taken over by the Dorchester County Truck Growers Association and is operated by the State Department of Employment Security.

### Better Than Most Camps

Waddell's may be worse than some camps in a three-county area surveyed by The Washington Post. But it is better than most.

There are 53 weathered frame shacks jammed into a large, circular clearing. As many as 140 laborers, their wives and children make their home there during the peak of the 4-month harvesting season.

The camp yard is littered with empty half-pint bottles, beer

cans and other debris. A group of children plays around a smoldering pile of leaves.

Inside a cabin you hear a woman singing and several pairs of hands clap in rhythmic unison.

At each corner of the camp stands a row of outdoor privies, doors yawning open.

Living accommodations at Waddell's and nearby Preston camp come in two sizes.

Most of the migrants live in small shacks, 8- by 10-foot cubicles equipped with cots, a small cook stove, and a light bulb. Rent, \$2 a week.

### Larger Family Model

The model for larger families is almost double the floor area and has a higher roof. Rent, \$4.

This price distinction is not respected by the swarms of mosquitoes and flies which infest the camps. Officials say that all the cabins were once screened.

Sometimes screens are ripped out so that it is easier to toss out garbage or dirty dishwater. Or else they just deteriorated.

"The migrants have become adjusted to this life," said the Rev. Carlton W. Veazey, a 23-year-old Howard University divinity student. As a member of the National Council of Churches Migrant Ministry, Mr. Veazey has five migrant camps under his supervision.

"I know deep in my heart that they want better things. They are doing an important job in harvesting the crops. I feel they are entitled to better facilities," he said.

With the help of the camp managers, the young minister fixed up a room for religious services where half of the camp's inhabitants come to worship each week.

Across Route 331 from Waddell's camp a group of pickers combed a field for small "Italian tomatoes—the remnants of this year's spoiled harvest.

A picker gets 15 cents a basket for small tomatoes and 10 cents for large ones. An additional 3 to 5 cents a basket goes to his crew leader—the man who recruited him and brought him North.

### 100 Baskets a Head

When the harvest is plentiful a hardworking crew will pick from early morning to twilight, averaging as much as 100 baskets a "head."

"You crawl along on your knees," explained William McNeil. "When they begin to hurt you stand up and pick. When your back starts bothering you, down on your knees again."

Beulah Simmons, a graying, dignified woman in her mid-forties, keeps count of the baskets. Other women and children pick in the fields along with the men.

"We can't count children as workers," explained one camp official. "But whether we count them or not, they'll be picking in the fields with their parents."

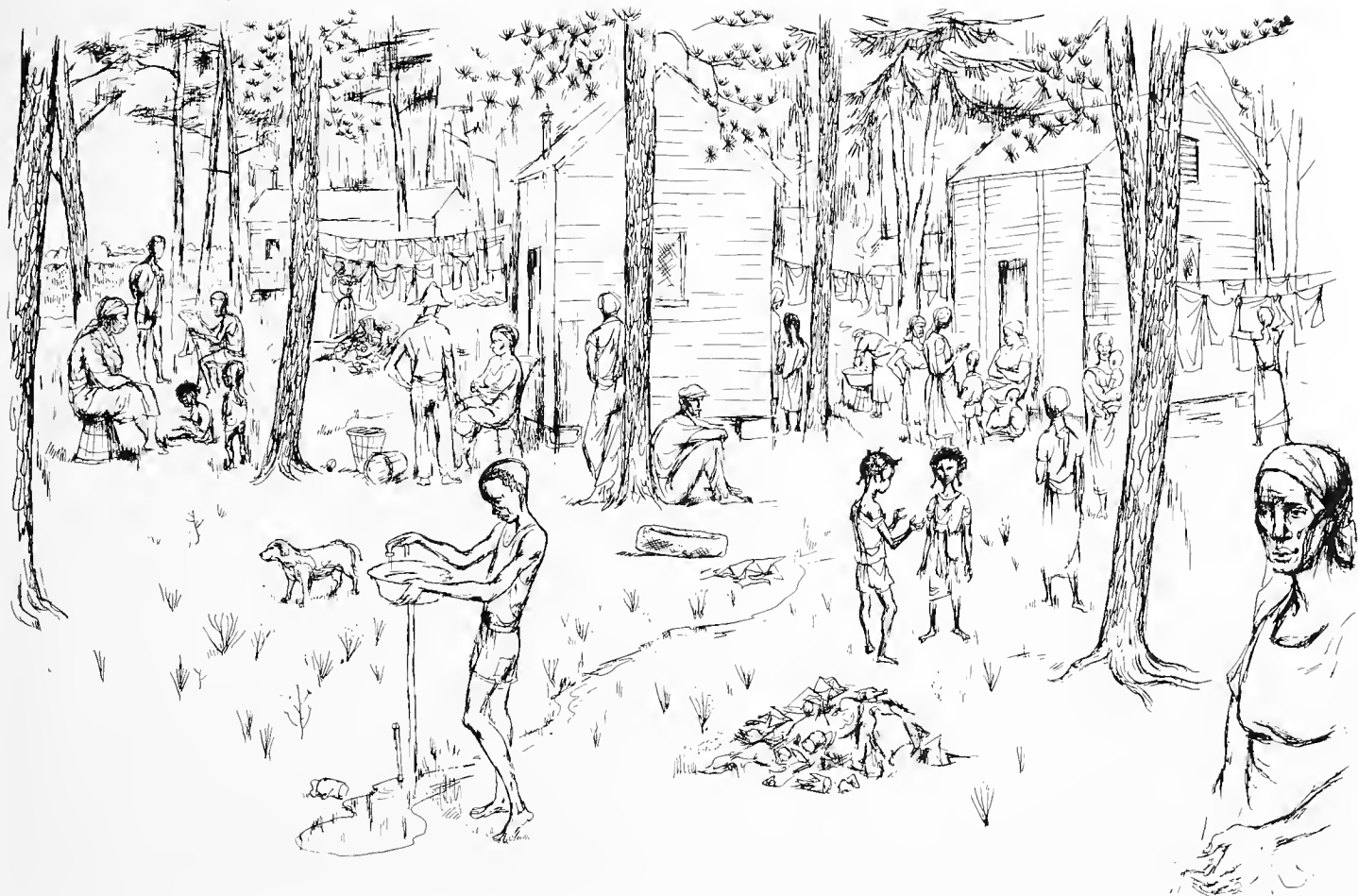
For infants and toddlers, makeshift nurseries are set up in the trucks and buses which carry the migrant to the fields.

Geraldine Simmons is a bright, attractive 13-year-old. She had to drop out of her sixth grade class in Apaka, Fla., 2 weeks early to come north with her parents.

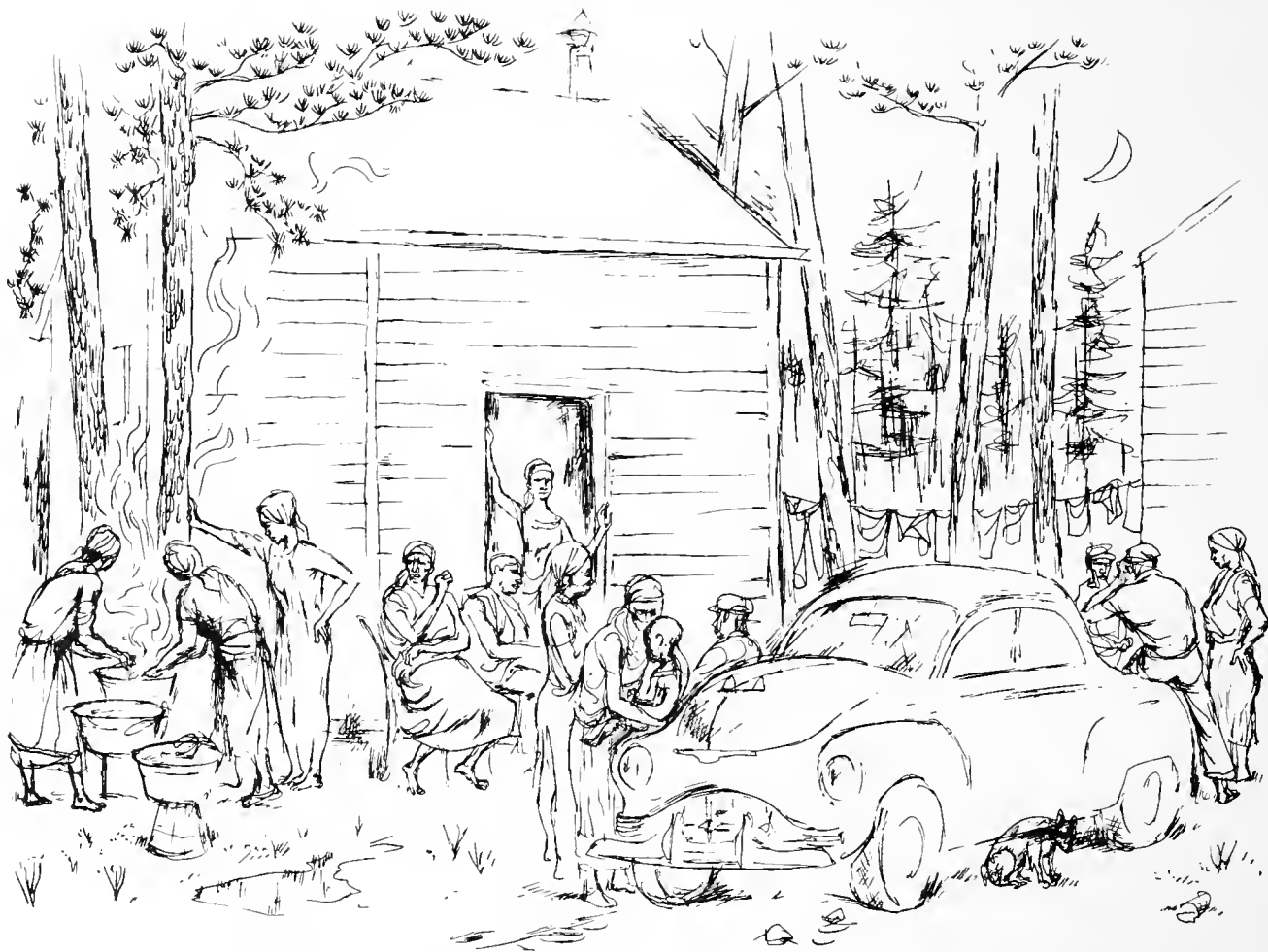
Next month she will enroll at Hurlock School, some 3 miles from the camp, until they leave for home in mid-October.

"Do you have much trouble catching up with your school work when you get home?" she was asked.

"Naw," she replied. "Not too much."



*Typical scene in a migratory camp on the Eastern Shore of Maryland.*



*Typical camp scene—migratory labor camp, Waddell.*

## CREW LEADER'S ROLE PUTS HIM IN MIDDLE

Each spring, crew leader John Graham loads up his battered school bus with workers and hauls them from Florida to Maryland's Eastern Shore.

To the 55 pickers in his crew, Graham is a combination of policeman, father, banker, and boss.

A grizzled, friendly man of 50, he has a reputation for dealing fairly with his workers. Some crew leaders, on the other hand, are known to exploit their crews ruthlessly.

Crew leaders like Graham form the elite of an army of 1 million migrant workers who harvest the Nation's crops. The farmer depends on him for manpower and the picker looks to him for a livelihood.

I talked to crew leaders and pickers alike in the three Eastern Shore counties where Maryland's migratory population is most heavily concentrated, Dorchester, Somerset, and Caroline.

One leader at Somerset Migratory Camp near Princess Anne drives a shiny, new Oldsmobile and owns a fleet of six trucks. Another was barely scraping along with a dilapidated moving van.

### People Penned in Trucks

Most of the trucks in the migratory camps had neither seats nor benches. As many as 40 men, women, and children are penned into these vehicles for the 900-mile trip. If they are lucky they may find a bean hamper to sit on.

In June 1957 a truck carrying 41 migrant workers crashed in North Carolina. The death toll was 21.

Six months later the Interstate Commerce Commission adopted a safety code for transportation of migrants. Among

other things, it requires that a secure seat be furnished for each passenger.

Each winter Graham and other crew leaders sit down with Maryland employment officials in Florida and chart a work schedule for the following year. The labor procurement agent is armed with a list of work orders from farmers back home.

A crew leader's earnings may run as high as \$10,000 in a season or as low as \$800, depending on the quality of the harvest and the size of his work force.

The basic economic cards of the migratory labor system are stacked heavily in his favor.

### Gets Flat Commission

A crew leader is paid a flat commission for each basket of tomatoes. This share varies from 3 to 5 cents a basket. The picker gets 10 cents.

By the season's end the crew leader may earn more than 10 times as much as one of his laborers. In the field he oversees the workers but does not do any picking himself.

Migrant workers first came to the Shore during World War



*Crew Leader Graham,  
Preston Migratory Camp.*

It when the pinch on agricultural manpower was at its worst. They have been coming back ever since.

Until the farmer can harvest his tomato, bean, cucumber, and pepper crops by machine they will always be a market for the migrant.

He is the cement that holds the Shore's farming economy together. The farmer is first to admit it.

"Without the migrant our canning industry would just have to shut down," maintains Robert McWilliams, who runs six farms sprawling over nearly 1,000 acres in upper Dorchester County.

### Cannery Is King

In the Eastern Shore's agricultural breadbasket, the cannery is king.

Not everyone agrees that the migrant is either necessary or desirable, least of all Charles Cornish who is lone Negro member of the Cambridge City Council.

"The migrant undercuts our domestic labor," said Cornish. "These people are being exploited by their own crew leaders. If the farmer was willing to pay a decent wage, he would be able to get plenty of local help."

Cornish owns a bus service. In the days before the migrants arrived he carried local farm laborers to the fields.

"A good many of the local Negroes feel the way I do," said Cornish. "The migrants have taken something away from them."



*Migratory pickers near Hurlock, Eastern Shore.*

## FEW CONCERNED OVER CONDITIONS

Robert McWilliams bought an abandoned church camp at Shiloh, Md., last year and converted it into housing for his migrant labor crews.

The effect on the good villagers was electrifying.

They swooped down on the Dorchester County Commissioners with complaints that the migrants would infect their community with crime, filth, and disease.

Yet migrants have been working in the fields near Shiloh since World War II when local farm manpower became scarce. Several labor camps have operated for years just a few miles away.

Most of the camps are hidden away along side roads on the outskirts of town. Many migrants live right on the farm at which they work.

It's easy for the average citizen to forget about the migrant's existence—until he reads about a stabbing or sex attack in a labor camp or finds an empty half-pint bottle on his property.

### Well-Behaved and Educated

The farmer sometimes talks about the migrants with touching solicitude.

"He's a human being, just as civilized, well-behaved, and educated as our local workers," said McWilliams, who is Dorchester County's biggest employer of migrants.

Nevertheless the farmer is first to howl against any effort to guarantee minimum standards of decency to the migrant in housing, health, or education.

This summer McWilliams bought 70 beds, 100 mattresses, and paid \$100-a-month electrical bills for his migrants. The water they drink, he insists, is just as good as his own.

McWilliams cannot understand why anyone wants to force him to observe minimum housing standards.

In 1957 the Maryland Department of Health made an exhaustive study of migrant living conditions. It found that 66 percent of the camps had unapproved water systems. Privies in 72 percent of the camps were below minimum sanitary standards.

Housing in general was found to be in an "unsound and dilapidated state."

A survey of the three Eastern Shore counties, Dorchester, Caroline, and Somerset, which depend most heavily on migrant labor, did not refute these findings.

### Health Officials Powerless

Yet health officials are powerless to act since labor camps are not under their control. Without a vote, the migrant is readily overlooked by the politician.

"I've never been in a migrant camp in my life," said Senator Frederick C. Malkus, who has represented Dorchester County in the legislature for 13 years. Malkus thinks the migrant is a local problem in which he, as a lawmaker, should not meddle.

If a migrant is hurt on the job, there is no formal machinery for getting him into a hospital. At best he gets medical attention through the back door, with the help of a minister.

Local citizens, who know the migrant cannot pay his hospital bill, are resentful.

As a nonresident agricultural worker, he is exempt from workmen's compensation, unemployment and minimum wage safeguards. Organized labor sometimes looks sympathetically



*Typical interior scene at the Waddell Camp for migratory workers.*

at his plight, but has made no serious attempts to do anything about it.

Maryland this year took its first step toward opening a window into the forgotten world of the migrant. Last winter the legislature and Gov. J. Millard Tawes created a Commission on Migratory Labor similar to agencies that exist in 23 other States.

### Minimum Housing Code

This group 2 weeks ago proposed a minimum housing code, such as Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey, and New York have already adopted.

When it is unveiled at public hearings, it will probably be denounced by the Eastern Shore's growers.

There have been a few exceptions to the general apathy over the migrant's lot. Foremost is the National Council of Churches which has attempted, through its "Migrant Ministry," to cultivate "a sense of personal worth, belonging, and responsibility" in the migrant.

"Considering the amount of work the migrant does and the money he brings into an area, State and county officials should take more responsibility for his welfare," said the Rev. Carlton W. Veazey, a 23-year-old Howard University divinity student serving on the Migrant Ministry.

At Westover Camp near Princess Anne the Council runs a model day care center for migrant children. Two more are in operation at Hurlock, Md., and Staytonville, Del.

### Center Is Immaculate

The Westover center is staffed all summer by two Somerset County teachers. Each child has a desk and clean cot. The center, once a ramshackle farm cabin, is kept in immaculate



*Doorway  
to a shack  
at Westover Camp.*

condition. But most migrant children who are too young to pick still wait for their parents in the bus or the truck which carries them to the field, just as other children have for years.

At Preston in Caroline County, the State health department has opened a clinic for expectant and new mothers. Migrants are also being tested for venereal disease and tuberculosis.

"There are still many gaps left uncovered," said the Rev. Samuel A. Snyder, Jr., the Migrant Ministry's southeast regional director.

"The basic problem of the migrant is his nonresident status," added Mr. Snyder. "Help comes to him only on an emergency basis."

*COVER PHOTO: When the harvest is good, migrants pick until  
their knees are sore and then they work standing.*





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